

New Comers: The Difficulties They Encounter Learning The Target Language and Possible Solutions.

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Abstract

This article focuses on the difficulties encountered by newcomers from diverse backgrounds who come to the United States with the desire to learn English and further their studies. Most of these newcomers sometimes face insurmountable difficulties while trying to learn the new language. In some cases, they hit brick walls and the only negative choice can be dropping out, and ultimately end up being repatriated for being out of status or fade into the society at large as undocumented immigrants. In this study, I will look into specific reasons responsible for the failure of the new comers, and consider possible solutions that learning institutions can put in place to help newcomers succeed in their educational quests.

Considering the swelling numbers of English language learners in United States learning institutions, it is of the utmost importance to understand and serve this population in an effective way. This is particularly so with adolescent new comers who enroll in schools in the United States knowing little or no English. The proportion of the adolescent ELL population varies from institution to institution. When they first arrive, they are most likely to enroll in community colleges where they take intensive English classes, and pay less for tuition than in the traditional four years colleges or universities.

When newcomers arrive, they come in with varying academic standards which include their ages on arrival, and level of literacy in the native languages. This being true, educators who serve them must do their utmost to help develop their oral, and written academic language skills within the shortest possible time. This is inevitable if they are to succeed in their academic endeavors.

The Upsurge in Foreign Student Population

The past several years has seen an increase in the foreign student population entering institutions of higher learning in the United States. That the United States has a lot of foreign nationals is not a new phenomenon, what is remarkable however is that the scale in recent years has been tremendously on the increase. The countries of origin are more diverse. In most United States institutions of higher learning, there exist huge populations of student bodies enrolled in Intensive English programs. In a recent survey I conducted at the Department of Intensive English in a community college in Houston, 100% of those surveyed said that their purpose of enrolling in the program was to better their English to further studies. All of them agreed that the only way to a better paying job is to continue with the careers they brought with them from their countries. While most of them were teachers, pharmacists, nurses, medical doctors, and engineers in their native countries, yet because of stringent US rules and regulations, they fall short of the standards required to practice their professions here in the United States. To do so, they

must go to school, and fulfill the conditions as stipulated in their fields of studies. In the United States 20% of children ages 5-17 have a foreign- born parent (Capps et al., 2005). This simply makes clear the fact that the foreign population is on the increase. At present the United States institutions of higher learning are populated by people from countries who before never considered coming to the United States. Nevertheless, as the United States continue to be the most dominant country, it is seen by most as the best place to receive their higher educations. Many schools and communities are not adequately prepared to teach these migrant students and must face this challenging reality (Garcia, Arias, Murri & Serna, 2010).

Challenges

The fact that the United States student population continues to be more diverse is unquestionable. Moreover, the origins of immigrant children have also become more diverse (Capps et. al, 2005); however, it is a known fact that the demographics of American teachers do not match those of the changing student population with the majority of teachers being white and an increasing number of them coming from a higher socioeconomic background (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). These teachers know nothing about the cultures of the students they are teaching. The students to whom English is a foreign language find it hard to adapt to the new culture. The teachers are monolingual and have no experience learning a foreign language. That is, they cannot put themselves in the situation the students they are working with are in.

Thus how to teach immigrant children presents a tremendous challenge to teachers (Garcia et al., 2010; Goodwin 2002, 2010). Teachers who work with or teach immigrants have to be very sensitive to their needs. They should have knowledge of the students' cultural backgrounds. They should also have the ability to communicate with students with limited proficiency in the Target Language. According to Garcia and colleagues, teachers knowledge and abilities with regards to English learners can be divided into three categories. These are: the curriculum, the learner, and understanding teaching: "students' funds of knowledge, families, communities, and the role of home culture impacting school outcomes; Connecting between language, culture, and identity; Sociocultural factors situated in communities, classrooms, and schools; Culturally responsive classroom, instruction, and cultural sensitivity." (p. 137).

Teacher Training

Though training the teacher to teach immigrant students can be considered the work of education programs, the personal experiences of the teachers themselves matter a whole lot. While most teacher education programs base their trainings on local contexts, most of the students they train to work with immigrants have never crossed the United States frontiers, not to say live in a foreign country. Teacher training programs are often among the least internationalized programs on American college and university campuses (Longview Foundation, 2008, p. 5) While it is not mandatory for the teachers that work with English Language Learners to speak the languages of their students, it helps a lot for them to be abreast with their different cultures. It is worth knowing that the learning

of language and culture are so intertwined that one cannot exist without the other. To teach students, you must know, and be very sensitive to the cultures they bring with them. Teacher training programs should start making their trainees think on a global level. Teacher training programs must help teachers change their worldly perspectives, thus empowering them to work successfully with the immigrant populations they serve. At best, it will be to the teachers' advantage if they can be allowed to do their teaching practices in urban schools with large concentration of immigrant students. This will at least prepare them to relate to their own students positively. Though one might consider it costly, it will be of great help if teacher training institutions begin coordinating with like institutions elsewhere overseas where they can send their student teachers so they can experience other cultures other than theirs.

When looking for ESL or EFL teachers, foreign institutions especially lay too much emphasis on native speakers. The irony in that is that most of these native speakers find it very hard to connect with the English language learners, not out of a fault of their own, but because they lack the cultural skills deemed very essential to work with the foreign students. Out of fifty successful English language learners that I recently surveyed at a local community college, almost 95% agreed that they owed their successes to their teachers who related to them very well because they understood their cultures, and respected them a lot. Asked whether the teachers were native speakers, they answered "No." Asked whether they preferred a native speaker, they said that for them being a native speaker is not important. According to them, what is important is that the teacher is fluent, and can relate to them because he or she understands their culture. Overseas recruiters are therefore encouraged to pay more attention to the part culture plays in the classroom. For students to learn, they should be able to connect to their teacher, and embody the belief that the teacher respects and cares for them. For teachers to provide their ESL students with effective instruction, they need to build healthy relationships with them. Unfortunately, far too many teachers who work with students learning English are ill prepared to instruct them (National Center for Education statistics, 2002; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). However, it should be clearly recognized that the problem goes far beyond an individual teacher's responsibility. For example, current teacher education research has not yet established how best to prepare future teachers to work with these students (Clark & Medina, 2000; Sleeter, 2008).

As I mentioned earlier, teachers should be armed with more than the methodological and procedural knowledge presently given to them by the teacher education programs. Of the utmost importance is for them to be able to relate with the struggles and strengths of their students. As global citizens, teachers must consider the fact that helping immigrants climb the academic echelon, by helping them first to master the target language which will eventually enable them to further their education is good not only for the well being of the immigrants as individuals, but for society in general. Otherwise, the world will find itself with workers that lack sufficient education to help boost the global economy.

Culturally Responsive Instruction

All Immigrants students that enter community colleges to learn English with the hope of continuing their studies are already educated in their primary languages. This is a strength that teachers of English to immigrant students must build on. Though it should not be a prerequisite that teachers speak the languages of their English language learning students, they should make their instructions relevant by recognizing and drawing on students' native languages and cultures. Even more, diversity should be made to have a place in the curriculum. This can be done considering the use of multilingual resources keeping in mind the student's communities. Nathansen-Mejia and Escamilia (2003) examined the use of "ethnic" literature to build preservice teachers knowledge of the cultures of their students, and, as a result, they began to show signs of cross cultural understanding and even to make use of this literature. They discovered in most instances that the use of multicultural literature in the classroom to a large extent boosted students' willingness to learn, and helped them remain focused.

Meaningful Relationships

According to Reeves, 2006; Valdes, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999, meaningful relationships are not only elusive and infrequent but also far too many students find themselves in classrooms where no cognitive challenge is present, where instruction consists of meaningless routines disconnected from the mainstream curriculum, and where students for the most part, are tracked into academic ends far from the goals of either meaningful work of tertiary schooling. The fact remains that the lack of meaningful relationships, and the lack of instruction tailored to the academic progress of the English language learner are closely intertwined. In all, the building of a meaningful relationship will go a long way to promote the quality of education. Students view meaningless instruction as a lack of concern on the side of the teacher. Teachers of English to newcomers must therefore do all they can to know their students, their students communities, and more so the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students. As such, it is of extreme necessity that instruction in the ESL classroom be culturally relevant.

Most of the problems faced by students learning English can be solved with the concerns and involvements of school personnel. In a recent survey I conducted in a high school here in Houston, 90 % of respondents who were all newcomers agreed that though they liked their principal who shows deep concerns for them, they could not relate to the curriculum. They all agreed that they hoped the teachers were equally concerned. Another survey I conducted with students in the Intensive English Department of a local community college confirmed the same concern the high school students had. Asked what type of personality they look for in their teachers, most of them answered that they liked teachers who are concerned about them, who can relate to them, and who can

address their pain and other concerns. Flores Gonzalez (2002) recognized that when school personnel find ways to address students' pain and other life concerns, they, in turn

are willing to invest their time and effort in learning. Valdes (2001) emphasizes that students' feel closely related to those teachers who on a daily basis show concerns about their families, and their lives. From a personal experience, as an adjunct professor of Intensive English in an area community college, I have realized the students are closely connected to me because of the concern I show for their lives outside of school. An example is a general greeting to all my students at the beginning of class, followed by a trip to the students' desks while they work in groups or independently, and a "How Are you Mrs. or Mr....? How is your family doing? How was your weekend or your day? I am very happy to see you today. Do you have any concerns?"

To show my appreciation for the students' cultures, I let them practice their speech and grammar by suggesting that they bring objects or art works from their cultures and present them to the class. I discovered that they did this with great enthusiasm, and even tried to be first in line to present. On other occasions, I bring in stories from different cultures that my students can relate to. I found that this greatly increased their interest in reading. Twice a week, I get to my classroom long before the scheduled time to give extra tutoring to my students, or help them with any personal forms they may need help with. Lee (2005), in a study looking into the school experiences of immigrant students, discovered that the adolescent Hmong Americans who took part in her study, thought highly of teachers who were willing to help them with their life concerns. Lee also found that teachers who were willing to provide extra tutoring to help struggling students were revered.

Transnational Experiences

Transnational experiences can go a long way to help teachers of English language learners. Those teachers who have lived and worked abroad have experiences that can help them best prepare to become teachers of students who are learning English. Often, it is very hard to know your students if you have not lived their experiences. Knowledge of what it means to be a young person from an immigrant background is essential if teachers should be able to relate to them. Teachers of ESL or EFL students must be knowledgeable about the communities their students come from. It will do a lot of good for teachers, especially those that have not lived in other cultures to dig out information about their students' cultures by reading books, magazines, or by surfing the internet. I am not suggesting that this is as good as experiencing it in person, but it can provide glimpses to the students' backgrounds that will help the teachers relate to their students in a positive way.

Undoubtedly, it will be a good thing for teachers to make a habit out of having students fill out questionnaires tailored towards identifying their prior knowledge especially that dealing with first language, cultural and experiential knowledge, and their reading practices. This will enable them to make connections to students before, during, and after instruction. While it is absolutely true that overcoming discomfort with other

cultures in a short period of time are a hard thing to do, with time, this can be accomplished.

Conclusion

Although the fact remains that newcomers to the United States face a lot of obstacles learning English, yet these obstacles can be overcome provided training institutions remain sensitive to their needs. Teacher training institutions must do their utmost to make sure that teacher trainees are well prepared to work with these students who come from cultures other than theirs. Additionally teachers that work with these students should have the ability to communicate with them taking into consideration the fact that these students are limited in their proficiency of the English language. While teacher training programs do their parts, the personal experiences of the teachers matter a whole lot. Teachers must be culturally sensitive, caring, and mix well with their culturally different students. To conclude, here are few problems common to The ESL classroom that teachers should know about, and ways to overcome them.

Most of the problems common to the ESL classroom have a lot to do with culture. These includes but not limited to students constant use of first language, students over dependence, students finding it difficult to understand what to do, students boredom, inattentiveness, and students being unmotivated. The most common problem in an ESL classroom is students' constant use of their first language. If this persists, teachers should establish class rules and develop a penalty for using any language in class other than English. An example can be asking students who are caught speaking a language other than English to write an essay about a suggested topic, and read it to the class. Some English language learners can become overly dependent on the teacher for answers during in-class assignments. Teachers should not be in the habit of giving out answers all the time. Teachers should encourage students to work independently. To avoid students from getting overly confused teachers can do well by using gestures, and short sentences, while they speak clearly with a strong voice. They must not always forget using examples of the activities they go through with the students.

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